

To: 'habtouch@yahoo.com'[habtouch@yahoo.com]
From: Ghosh-Mazumdar, Anu
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Subject: From Sotheby's New York
[KhmerDetails.pdf](#)

Dear Mr. Hab,

I hope you are well. We have never met before so allow me to introduce myself. My name is Anu Ghosh-Mazumdar and I am the Indian and Southeast Asian art specialist at Sotheby's New York. I have admired your eloquent writing about the glory of Cambodian art and culture in various publications, especially your foreword to Douglas Latchford and Emma Bunker's book *Adoration and Glory*.

I am writing to you about a Khmer masterpiece that Sotheby's is offering for sale in our March 2011 auction of Indian and Southeast Asian Art in New York. This monumental Koh Ker period sculpture of an Athlete is pair to a similar figure in the collection of the Norton Simon Museum in California. Both sculptures were introduced into the auction market by Spink's of London in the late 1960s/ early 1970s, and were viewed by many curators, specialists and collectors at the time. Our Athlete was eventually sold to a private European Collector in 1975 whilst the Norton Simon acquired theirs in 1978/79.

We are delighted that Emma Bunker, whom of course you know, has written our catalogue essay for the object, enclosed here. She will also give a lecture about the sculpture during our exhibition preview week next March when this masterpiece will be presented to our worldwide audience of collectors, including both museums and private individuals.

We wanted you to be amongst the first to know about the upcoming sale of this highly important Koh Ker sculpture. Please do not hesitate to contact us if you require any further information.

Sincerely,

Anu Ghosh-Mazumdar

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Indian and Southeast Asian Works of Art
New York 24 March 2011

PROPERTY FROM THE COLLECTION OF A NOBLE EUROPEAN LADY

MONUMENTAL SCULPTURE OF AN ATHLETE
SANDSTONE, KHMER, KOH KER STYLE AND PERIOD

10th century

HEIGHT 92 IN

\$2,000,000 - 3,000,000

PROVENANCE

Private European Collection

Acquired Spink & Son Ltd., London, December 1975

FRONT IMAGE: Khmer Koh Ker-style sandstone figure of an athlete, h. 160 cm.

This large and spectacular tenth-century Cambodian sculpture, 160 centimeters in height and exceptionally well carved, will be the highlight of Sotheby's upcoming *Indian and Southeast Asian Works of Art* sale in New York during Asia Week in March of 2011 (fig. 1). The figure represents a powerful athletic male and was expressly commissioned by Jayavarman IV to enhance his grandiose capital at Lingapura located northeast of Angkor in present-day Koh Ker. (1)

The splendid heroic figure is mate to the Koh Ker-style athlete at the Norton Simon Museum in Pasadena that is almost identical in posture and physical appearance. (2) The two figures were probably once shown in hand-to-hand combat, so would have originally faced each other, producing an ensemble similar to the wrestling contest between the two simian brothers in the *Reamker*, Valin and Sugriva, in the Phnom Penh Museum that was found in the entry tower (*gopura*) of Prasat Chen in the temple complex at Koh Ker, and not in a sanctuary intended for worship, according to Khmer art historian Hiram W. Woodward in a lecture given six years ago at the Norton Simon Museum. (3)

The figure's energetic and aggressive posture derives from Khmer royal dance movements. Dance-dramas of Cambodia often perform episodes from ancient Hindu epics, mythology, and legend that have been major features of Khmer culture throughout the country's long and often turbulent history. Every pose and gesture has a specific emotion and meaning. The language of gesture gives Khmer dance forms a special dimension of expression that was considered as much a form of worship as a form of theatre. (4) The Koh Ker athlete strikes a pose similar to that of Ravana in a contemporary performance of the *Reamker*, the Khmer version of the great Indian epic, the *Ramayana*. (5)

Koh Ker-period sculptures, named after the town in which they were discovered, are among the great masterpieces of Khmer art, unequaled by images from any other period in their portrayal of drama and potential action. This figure is enormously tactile and impressive, reflecting the prestige and importance of the egotistical Khmer ruler who commissioned it, and the ultimate mastery of the Khmer artisans who produced it.

A fierce scowling expression marks the face, emphasizing the awesomeness of his appearance. The arched double-bow-shaped eyebrows give the face a threatening quality (fig. 2). His face features a rakish moustache with curled-up tips, a full sensuous mouth, and a hairline extending from under the ornate diadem along the sideburns continuing into the beard. A four-tiered chignon-cover is encircled by a diadem and attached by ribbons tied in a square knot at the back, typical of the Koh Ker style. (fig. 3)

Typical Khmer royal elite dress and ornate simulated gold jewelry distinguish the figure. Naked above the waist, the athlete is clothed in a pleated *sampot chang kben* with a large over-fold in front and a pendant scarf. The two fishtail terminations of the scarf ingeniously appear to swing slightly to one side, subtly reflecting the skill of the artisan and emphasizing the implied movement of the combatants.

The raw power expressed by the posture of this huge figure is heightened by the tense back muscles and bulging arms that inform the viewer that this was more than simply a temple guardian standing to one side of a sanctuary door, as he has always been described. (fig. 4) Instead, he must have been a major participant in a sacred mythological struggle, as yet unidentified, that would have been easily recognizable to the Khmer elite of his day, serving as a visual metaphor for a current parallel socio-political issue.

If one could choose only one sculpture to represent the glory of Khmer art, this figure could fulfill such a challenge. Held in a private collection in Europe for the last forty years, this example of the best of Khmer sculpture is now available for purchase by a major buyer to share with the world.

EMMA C. BUNKER

ILLUSTRATION CAPTIONS

Fig. 1. Khmer Koh Ker-style sandstone figure of an athlete, h. 160 cm.

Fig. 2. Khmer athlete, close-up of the face.

Fig. 3. Khmer athlete, back view of the head.

Fig. 4. Khmer athlete, full back view.

REFERENCES

1. Bunker, Emma C. and Douglas Latchford. *Adoration and Glory*. Bangkok and Chicago: Art Media Resources, 2003, 149-151.
2. Pal, Pratapaditya. *Art from Sri Lanka & Southeast Asia*, Asian Art at the Norton Simon Museum, volume 3, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004, 176-77, no. 141.
3. Woodward, Hiram W. jr., Lecture given at the Norton Simon Museum, April 22, 2005.
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10th century

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